

Disconnected Both Offline and Online: Identity Construction in an Online Depression Community in China

Yating *Chen**

*College of Foreign Languages, Huaqiao University

Abstract

Today's China presents a paradoxical scenario where remarkable economic prosperity coexists with escalating mental health challenges, particularly the alarming prevalence of depression among the youth. Many adolescents in China held a reluctant attitude toward the use of mental health services. Instead, they resort to expanding online depression communities (ODCs) across social media as an alternative means of communication about their depressive experience. This study observes a group of young people who frequently confide their depressive emotions and stories under a dead stranger's Weibo page called 'Zoufan' (走饭), the largest unmanaged ODC in China. Employing small stories research methods, it describes and interprets how the participants construct their individual and collective identities in the 'progress paradox' of Chinese society. A total of 2,000 comments from the top 20 core participants of 'Zoufan' were analysed by drawing on the Social Identity Theory (SIT). The findings reveal that when the core participants constructed their individual identity, their comments conveyed three recurring themes of 'lacking'—support, 'eligibility', and associations in their offline lives. When they constructed their collective identity, their comments reflected three connotations related to personal intimacy with the late Ms. Ma/Zoufan, which, however, lack genuine connections with other community members online. The discussion and conclusion highlight a painful state of disconnection that these individuals experience both offline and online, drawing attention to a sense of alienation

* Dr Yating Chen, Lecturer, College of Foreign Languages, Huaqiao University. Email: chenyating@hqu.edu.cn.

and further revealing the underlying socio-cultural issues that permeate Chinese society.

Keywords: *Disconnect, Depression, Identity Construction, Small Stories, Online Community, 'Zoufan' Weibo.*

1. Introduction

According to the World Health Organization (WHO), around 332 million people have depression globally by 2025 (World Health Organization, 2025). Previous research proved that depression turns out to be a significant risk factor and the leading cause in most suicide cases (e.g., Li *et al.*, 2012), while suicide is the No.1 cause of death among Chinese young people aged 15-34 (Zhao, 2018). In China, the prevalence of depression among college students ranges from 15 to 40 per cent, a rate significantly higher than the 5 per cent observed in the general population before 2019 (Song *et al.*, 2020). During the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020, the estimated overall prevalence of depression witnessed a dramatic surge, reaching an alarming rate of 26.9 per cent (Liu *et al.*, 2022). In that period, China's adolescent population reached 156 million, indicating that over 9 million Chinese adolescents could have depression, based on the global statistic that 6.2 per cent of adolescents worldwide experience this mental illness (Zhou *et al.*, 2023). Notably, the incidence of depression is on the rise annually, affecting both the general population and adolescents/youths.

Over the past 20 years, China has experienced remarkable economic expansion and made substantial strides in alleviating poverty, despite the pandemic leading to lower economic growth. Conversely, life satisfaction and well-being have significantly declined over these two decades, a counterintuitive phenomenon called the 'progress paradox' (Graham *et al.*, 2017). This term highlights the discrepancy between rapid socioeconomic advancements and the psychological well-being of individuals, challenging the notion that material prosperity contributes to happiness. Moreover, individuals from urban areas and with higher education levels are more prone to reporting depression than their counterparts in rural regions and with lower levels of education (Graham *et al.*, 2017). This finding corroborates the phenomenon that the participants of this study, who are active users of Weibo, are more susceptible to depression due to their

identities as the newly emerged Chinese middle class (Anagnost, 2008), a demographic characterised by its urban setting and higher educational attainment. The pressures and challenges faced by this group, epitomised by the concept of *neijuan* or ‘involution’, which signifies an intensely competitive social environment that compels individuals to engage relentlessly in competition (Gu & Mao, 2022), are likely contributing factors to the rising rates of depression among them.

Numerous studies have examined the depression rate, the factors and consequences (e.g., suicide) among adolescents, particularly within the student population (e.g., Gao *et al.*, 2020; Zhou *et al.*, 2023). However, it was not until 2020 that the General Office of the National Health Commission of China released a work plan on exploring characteristic services for depression prevention and treatment, which, for the very first time, targeted adolescents from middle school to institutions of higher learning, which has much overlapped with this study’s participants, who are Weibo users between 18 and 22 years old (data.weibo.com, 2019). Despite this, the current research reveals reluctance, failure, and delays in seeking offline treatment among many adolescents and college students in China over the past two decades (Hesketh *et al.*, 2002; Ip *et al.*, 2016). In contrast, online or web-based mental health services show promise in addressing the largely unmet needs for mental health recovery in China (Tan *et al.*, 2021). These services are highly accessible, acceptable, and efficient, though their effectiveness still requires further investigation (Tan *et al.*, 2020). Against this backdrop, online depression communities (ODCs) on social media platforms have rapidly proliferated, and this study is inspired by one of these communities in China, namely, ‘Zoufan’ Weibo.

2. Online Depression Community and ‘Zoufan’ Weibo

The challenges China faced in addressing the widespread depression, including but not limited to stigma and stereotypes, lack of effective therapies and inadequate mental-health resources, and high charges for counselling and psychotherapy (Smith, 2014; Zhang *et al.*, 2017), have highlighted the increasing need for online mental health communities, such as ‘tree holes’ and support groups (Chen, 2024). An important notion about online communities and psychological well-being is the “sense of place” in these communities, which is related to the third of the three essential places in people’s lives proposed by Oldenburg (1999) – the place for living, the

place for work, and the place for conviviality. However, in the case of online mental health communities, especially Online Depression Communities (ODCs), there seems to be a fourth place – the place for melancholy.

Rather than being titled and regulated by managers, unmanaged ODCs are often self-formed and feature a prevailing sharing of negative emotions (usually associated with higher levels of depression symptoms) and mundane, fragmented, and daily communication (Tang *et al.*, 2021). Without professional support groups and policies on content and participation restrictions, unmanaged ODCs often contain discussions on suicide that probably increase suicide risk (Settanni & Marengo, 2015). The research site for this study, ‘Zoufan’ (走饭) Weibo, is the largest unmanaged ODC in China and the largest ‘tree hole’ on Weibo.

In March 2012, Ms. Ma Jie (马洁), the blogger for the Weibo page ‘Zoufan’ and a college student born in the 1990s, took her own life. Since then, the number of followers of ‘Zoufan’ has been increasing exponentially, transforming the page into a living community and symbolic space where ‘regular members’ share their experiences with depression. The large-scale following has not only attracted scholarly attention but also that of Weibo authorities. Due to the stringent governmental regulation of Weibo and rising concerns over ‘collective suicide’ (Crabtree *et al.*, 2010), all 1,897 of her posts were removed from the desktop version of the platform in 2020, although they remain accessible via mobile devices. Also, the exact number of followers has been obscured, replaced by an artificially fixed estimate. Nevertheless, ‘Zoufan’ followers appear undeterred by these interventions, continuing to value this space as a vital outlet for emotional expression and identity construction, which underscores this research’s positioning: Rather than merely focusing on this social media platform, the study seeks to unpack the social phenomenon catalysed by Ms. Ma’s suicide, which has proliferated in a ‘butterfly effect’ across the digital landscape.

Despite the community’s unique and representative significance as a social phenomenon, it remains underexplored in academic research. Among the limited studies targeted explicitly at the ‘Zoufan’ Weibo, a prominent investigation aspect is to recognise suicidal ideation/tendency and help prevent suicide based on artificial intelligence or discourse analysis (Gao & Meng, 2019). However, the detection was mostly based on topic identification by text mining or word frequency calculation, which is insufficient to delve deeper into the socio-cultural factors that explain the

uncontrollable and soaring growth of ‘Zoufan’ followers. Also, little attention was paid to the complicated relationship between the depression narratives and the identity themes that emerged from these narratives.

This study extends beyond merely focusing on the textual representation of depression, delving into how the core participants of the ‘Zoufan’ community construct their identities within the context. Given that identity explores “how people understand their relationship to the world, how that relationship is constructed across time and space” (Norton, 1997:410), it is rational for this study to consider identity work as a lens through which the socio-cultural factors contributing to depression in China can be examined and discussed. Specifically, this study is anchored by a three-fold objective: First, it explores the core participants’ individual identities as depressed persons via self-disclosure in the community; Second, it analyses the core participants’ collective identities as the community members; Lastly, it seeks to portray the real-life plights faced by this group of people by situating ‘Zoufan’ phenomenon in broader socio-cultural contexts of today’s China. These objectives are mainly realised by linguistic analysis of the small stories shared by the commenters, alongside the application of the Social Identity Theory (SIT).

3. Identity Construction and Social Identity Theory

This study adopts a postmodern perspective of identity construction: Identities are fluid, malleable, changeable, multiple, complex, and situated in the social context (Cruwys *et al.*, 2014; McCarthey & Moje, 2002; Mishler, 2004; Sarup, 1996). In essence, “the theories of construction presume that identity is produced, and changed, at least in part by a person’s interactional, situational, sociohistorical, and cultural contexts...challenges universal, ahistorical accounts of fixed or essential identities which centre on a bounded or monadic individual” (Taylor, 2015: 2). Accordingly, identity construction is deemed a social process, and more importantly, a discursive production of self in contexts. This resonates with the Social Identity Theory (SIT)’s conceptualization of the self as a set of stable traits but also a potentially fluid process.

SIT originally emerged to expound intergroup phenomena or group processes (Tajfel, 1970), but later, it became an umbrella term that contains two theoretical methods: social identity theory and self-categorization theory (Turner & Oakes, 1997). The first is related to sameness, oneness, and

collectivity, whereas the second is very close to the meaning of individuality. Note that ‘collective identity’ is sometimes used interchangeably with ‘social identity’ (e.g., Cruwys et al., 2014; McKinlay & McVittie, 2011; van Leeuwen, 2021), and some researchers (e.g., Bamberg *et al.*, 2011) combined membership categories and physical characteristics into the notion of personal identities, because “the personal/individual is social, and vice versa” (Bamberg, 2012: 15). Nonetheless, to avoid ambiguity and overlapping meanings of those concepts, this study employs ‘collective identity’ to indicate the community’s membership as oneness, and ‘individual identity’ to denote the uniqueness of the person(s) compared to the group outsiders. Thus, identity in this study is disaggregated into individual and collective identity.

Individual identity refers to self-categories and self-perceptions that define the individual as unique (e.g., ‘I’ and ‘me’). In contrast, collective identity refers to the collective categorical self (e.g., ‘we’ and ‘us’) (Turner *et al.*, 1994). Hence, individual identity emphasises the “uniqueness and inwardness” of the self (van Leeuwen, 2021: 12), while collective identity accentuates the condition of being the sameness or oneness within a group (McKinlay & McVittie, 2011). On the one hand, an individual is distinguished from others by important self-definitions and self-understandings regarding interests, attitudes, and behaviours. On the other hand, separate individuals share homologous habitus in a *universe of practice* and *field* (Bourdieu, 1977) or a *nexus of practice* - particular entities and social constructs with a consistent, self-regulating and ratifying set of rules of practices (Scollon, 2001). For example, each comment under ‘Zoufan’ is a point of linkage among the community’s whole network of linked practices, and the multiple linkages with recurring production of interactions make ‘Zoufan’ a nexus.

SIT has now been increasingly used as a framework for understanding health issues and phenomena (Haslam *et al.*, 2009), which “provide meaning to life, encourage the provision and receipt of social support, facilitate social influence, and engender a sense of belongingness” (Cruwys *et al.*, 2014: 13). All of these contribute to the power of social identity to protect against depression. For example, identifying strongly with larger and better groups usually has positive implications for self-esteem (Haslam & Reicher, 2006). However, given that depression has a ‘tradition’ of stigmatisation, identifying with an ODC may result in a non-significant relationship between

identification and well-being (Molero *et al.*, 2011) or a paradoxical mixture of positive and negative influences. Moreover, the group members are also vulnerable to the group's social influences, particularly social withdrawal, suicidality, and self-harm (Handley *et al.*, 2012).

Focusing on the relationship between engagement in ODCs and the construction of social identity, this study aims to explore how identities function within depression narratives as tangible resources for understanding depression. It proposes two conceptualisations: (1) Linguistic expressions (i.e., comments) can offer clues to the commenters' social identities in online and off contexts, including individual identities that bridge divides and collective identities that create connection (see more in Cohen, 2022); (2) 'Zoufan' is a nexus for understanding the social actions of macro-sharing of depressive experience in ODCs and the underlying socio-cultural factors.

4. Methods and Data

Instead of addressing the issue in question by psychological or psychiatric methods, this study situates and analyses the virtual data within the framework of the small stories research paradigm, to examine the depression narratives and identity construction from a linguistic perspective. Small stories research refers to accounts that are brief in length and ephemeral in nature, which are often underrepresented (Bamberg & Georgakopoulou, 2008). Including small stories in the main agenda of narrative and identity analysis is a necessity, given that our sense of constancy seems to be gained by a continuously changing process, and it is in everyday practices as sites of continuous and repetitious engagement that a continuous sense of 'who-we-are' comes to form (Bamberg & Georgakopoulou, 2008). Most of the comments under 'Zoufan' in this research are small, tiny talks or even talks of 'nothing'. As such, they could be deemed as the narratives that belong to 'small stories'. Unlike big data sources such as autobiographies, this research values these mundane and seemingly insignificant interactions, which are often overlooked yet essential for capturing the micro and fleeting aspects of lived experience.

Python (2020) was used to crawl the comments under the last farewell post of 'Zoufan' between 28 August and 20 December 2020 on a daily basis. A total of 67,614 comments (after all the duplicated, invalid, and blank values were removed) posted by 11,798 commenters under the last post of 'Zoufan' were collected. Of this entire data population, only 18 per

cent (N=12,103 pieces) are replies (回复) to other commenters, indicating a minimal interest in having dialogue among the commenters. This enclosed state, characterised by a sombre and pessimistic tone (Chen, 2024), suggests that the depressed self is often shaped within a confined and negative mental space (Chen *et al.*, 2024).

To locate the group of followers who most strongly identify themselves with ‘Zoufan’ and to rule out those who post only sporadically without long-term attachment to the community, this study tracked the most active users who frequently posted comments and replies under Zoufan’s last post and identified the top 20 commenters¹. A critical epistemological stance in this context is the recognition of the challenges and the secondary importance of verifying clinical diagnoses of depression among participants. Instead, through the process of filtration, a group of participants who demonstrate belongingness can be identified. These individuals consistently and actively engage with the community, indicating a higher likelihood of experiencing persistent depressive moods or disorders.

An aggregate of 2,000 pieces of comments from these top 20 core participants (100 pieces for each) was then randomly selected and imported into NVivo 12 Plus for further coding. The semantic coding technique of selective coding was employed to categorise the comments under two nodes: ‘Individual identities’ and ‘collective identities’. In determining and classifying the comments into these two types, attention was paid to relevant linguistic cues from vocabularies such as pronouns (e.g., ‘we’, ‘I’) and nominal expressions (e.g., ‘family’, ‘friend’, ‘Zoufan’) to the topic of the sentence, including syntactic topic, pragmatic topic and entity topic. The whole coding process went back and forth to ensure each comment was appropriately coded under the correct nodes. As hermeneutic interpretation can build out a more general theory or ‘ground theory’ based on coding (Kozinets *et al.*, 2014), this study then describes and explains the core participants’ data set in a hermeneutic way, supported by the small stories research paradigm, to present the newly emerging master-narrative (variously called ‘capital D discourses’) of the widespread depression in today’s Chinese society.

As for ethical concerns, given that self-presentation in cyberspace is an extension of offline identities and the depressed individuals in this community are vulnerable to potential harm, this research follows the conventional guidelines of ethical conduct as well as the ethical guidelines

for internet research (franzke, 2020; Townsend & Wallace, 2016), all information and data are handled professionally while privacy, anonymity, and confidentiality are ensured. All the names shown in the republishing are further pseudonymous, and all comments collected are exclusive to this study for fulfilling research purposes only.

Notably, given that the Chinese language prioritises the conveyance of ideas over strict adherence to grammatical rules, numerous comments feature omissions of subjects and conjunctions, alongside indistinct separations between sentences. Under these conditions, grammatical elements and punctuation that are omitted in the original Chinese are added within parentheses in the translation that follows. This ensures that the English rendition becomes more coherent and readable.

5. Findings and Analysis

This section mainly discusses two salient identities — ‘depressed individuals’ and ‘Zoufan members’, which are considered antecedent and generic identities that feature the sameness of the core participants’ mental conditions and the representativeness of their membership, respectively. The first identity, ‘depressed individuals’, projecting more emotional and physical characteristics that differentiate the participants from non-depressed people, is categorised as the individual identity that underpins the uniqueness of the depression-related image of a person. In contrast, the second identity, ‘Zoufan’ members, denotes a membership category and belongs to the collective identity that accentuates the condition of being oneness in this community.

5.1 Identity as Depressed Individuals

The ‘Zoufan’ Weibo page is themed with ‘depression’ because of its owner, Ms. Ma (or Zoufan). Consequently, the commenters are bonding and identifying themselves with Zoufan’s ‘from-depression-to-suicide’ story, which only makes sense when the communications are carried out via the social connections in this community context. The excerpt below subtly reveals the reasons for seeking solace and understanding in ‘Zoufan’—disconnection offline due to the absence of understanding from the surroundings, the deficiency of self-fulfilment and the lack of social associations.

Excerpt 1:**(1) Dialogue between Alice and Flo: ‘They do not believe.’**

Time span: 01:56:00-02:06:00 Date: 6 September 2020

Turn	Name	Comment/reply
11	Alice:	在家人面前崩溃，我做不到，做不到，我压抑的太好了。天啊，真的好痛苦。 I cannot break down in front of (my) family, I just cannot do it. I have suppressed myself too well. Oh my God, it is really miserable.
12	Flo:	我家人跟朋友都不信，他们觉得我不可能得抑郁…… My family and friends did not believe (me); they thought I could not have depression...
13	Alice:	嗯，我同桌也不觉得。 Well, my desk mate did not believe (me) either.
14	Flo:	我之前跟一个非常好的朋友说过，她也只劝我不要想太多，我也曾一度怀疑，真的是我想太多吗…… I told a very close friend before (about my depression), and she only advised me not to overthink, so I also once doubted whether it was real that I thought too much...
15	Alice:	我的老师也不信，她说，你抑郁什么啊？ My teacher also did not believe (me), (and) she said, “Why are you depressed?”
16	Flo:	我现在都不想说了，没人能理解我，只会叫我别想太多，多做些开心的事……我已经不知道怎么让自己开心了…… Now I do not want to talk about (my depression) anymore, no one can understand me, (they) would only tell me not to overthink and do more happy things...(but) I do not even know how to make myself happy anymore...
17	Alice:	是啊……我的闺蜜一直跟我说，要开心点，说实话这句话给我带来的其实是无边的压力。我要怎样才能体会到快乐？ Yeah...my bestie always tells me, to be happy, but to be honest, this sentence brought me immense pressure actually. What on earth can I do to experience happiness??
18	Flo:	我也不知道，以前很容易就能感觉到开心，但现在不行了，跟朋友出去也没有感到开心……只是没有在家那么闷而已…… I do not know either, I used to feel happy easily, but now I cannot, even going out with friends does not make me feel happy anymore... it is just not as boring as staying at home...

(2) Dialogue between Kai and Yan: ‘...not entitled to talk about depression.’

Time span: 3:17:00-3:47:00 Date: 21 October 2020

Turn Name Comment/reply

- 21 Kai: 穷且丑，原生家庭又单亲，我这种人婚恋市场也不行。真没啥竞争力。失败的垃圾。也没什么动力赚钱。真的丧的要死。
(I am) poor and ugly, from a single-parent family, and people like me do not have much appeal in the dating market. (I) really do not have competitiveness. (I am) a failed piece of rubbish. (I) do not even have the motivation to make money. (I am) really languishing to death.
- 22 Yan: 美丑都是别人说的，反正我是从不在意，婚恋市场时代不同以往了，为嘛要着急结婚呢，为嘛要结婚呢？一个人过一辈子的也不在少数（当然看个人）。单亲家庭起码有把你养到16吧 有的那些姥姥不疼舅舅不爱爹妈各奔东西的年轻人十四五就得自己养活自己。前半生注定只能活在痛苦中。
Beauty and ugliness are remarks from others, anyway, I do not care, the marriage market era is different from the past, why (are you) anxious to get married? Why get married? There are a few people who live their entire lives alone (depending on the individual, of course). Your single-parent family at least supports you until (you are) 16 years old, how about those young people who were not loved by their families, not looked after by their parents, and have had to live on their own since (they were) 14 or 15 years old? The first half of their life is doomed to live in pain.
- 23 Kai: 你说的这种情况我遇到过。然后她自杀了。所以还是不太想用比惨式的情况来跟我这种单亲家庭做对比。我的意思就是。不要觉得这个人不够惨就好像这个人没资格谈自己有抑郁症…也不用和我说别人多惨，我觉得大家都好难。真的好难。
I encountered such a situation before. Then she committed suicide. So (,) I do not really want to compare such a situation to a single-parent family case like mine and compare which one was more tragic. My point is, do not think that if a person is not miserable enough (,) he/she is not entitled to say he/she had depression...and (you) do not have to tell me how miserable it is for someone else. I think we all live a hard life. It's really hard.

(3) Commented by Wendy:

没有伙伴，我只有手机。时而开朗，时而平静，又时不时觉得乏味……抑郁，谁不抑郁，有吗……我对死一点都不感兴趣，可是活着，唉，为了活而活啊，少了什么啊……

(I) have no friends, I only have a mobile phone. Sometimes (I feel) cheerful, sometimes (I feel) calm, and from time to time (I) feel bored...Depressed, who isn't depressed, is there (anyone not depressed) ...I have no interest in death at all, but to live, alas, to live just to be alive, (I feel) something is missing...

Excerpt 1 is composed of two complete dialogues (Turn 11-18 and Turn 21-23) and one comment left by Wendy:

The first dialogue highlights a shared theme within the depression narrative: The absence of understanding and care from family and friends. In Excerpt 1 (1), Key stakeholders, as italicised, have emerged sequentially: ‘family’, ‘friends’, ‘desk mate’, ‘a very close friend’ and ‘bestie’. Those intimate and important characters were expected to offer positive and strong support to the commenters. However, they instead contributed to feelings of suppression (‘suppressed’ in Turn 11), misunderstanding (repeated ‘did not believe’ in Turn 12, 13 and 15), doubt and self-doubt (‘doubted’ in Turn 14 and ‘why’-question in Turn 15), misconceptions about depression (repeated ‘overthink’ in Turn 14 and 16) and overwhelming pressure (‘immense pressure’ in Turn 17). The responses exacerbate the frustration, confusion, and sense of failure (‘what’-question in Turn 17 and the negations ‘cannot’/‘does not’ in Turn 18), especially in the context of societal expectations to ‘do more happy things’ or ‘be happy’ (Turns 16 and 17).

This dialogue highlights ‘Zoufan’ not only as a place where participants can openly share their depression, finding empathy and recognition from peers, but also signals a broader societal challenge — a significant gap in achieving depression recognition and intervention, underscored by the low and incorrect depression awareness among those closest to the affected individuals. However, family and friends play a decisive role in influencing individuals with depression on whether to seek professional help for their mental health challenges. Therefore, fostering more inclusive and understanding environments, both socially and culturally, is crucial, particularly within significant collective units like families and schools. Although illness is often regarded as a private matter, the master narratives on depression must first be normalised within the public sphere in China, a collectivist society. Then, this normalisation will enable individuals to feel validated when sharing their experiences more openly and foster greater understanding and support from others.

The second dialogue in Excerpt 1 (2) demonstrates the second theme—the deficiency of self-fulfilment and the lack of ‘eligibility’ to disclose depression in real life. First, Kai’s negative self-perceptions are exacerbated by Chinese societal expectations that emphasise material wealth, physical appearance, personal achievement, etc. The negative descriptors such as ‘poor and ugly’ and phrases like ‘not have much appeal’ and ‘not have competitiveness’ in Turn 21 suggest a deep-seated sense of not measuring up to expectations. This narrative is not unique to Kai but reflects a broader

sentiment among today's young people in China, highlighting how the lack of self-fulfilment is deeply intertwined with larger socio-cultural narratives of 'success' in China. As argued by Xiang and Qi (2023), "the idea of proving oneself is a paradox" (p.199), young people are compelled to validate their existence through preexisting standards. However, this relentless pursuit of recognition often comes at the expense of happiness and self-worth, as the societal definition of happiness in China remains narrowly aligned with the definition of success, leaving little room for individual fulfilment or emotional well-being. Then, Kai's conclusion in Turn 21, 'languishing to death', echoes the sentiment of fatigue and a sense of stagnation. 'Languish' is defined as "a neglected middle child of mental health" between depression and flourishing — the absence of well-being (Grant, 2021). This is where the emergent life philosophy concept of 'lying flat' (*tang ping* in Chinese) becomes particularly relevant, symbolising a rejection of relentless competition and the pursuit of conventional markers of success.

This dialogue also illuminates the complex interplay between societal perceptions of mental health and individual experiences of depression. Kai probably hoped to elicit some empathy and support from the unforeseeable audience by sharing her personal struggles. However, Yan's reply in Turn 22 interpreted Kai's upbringing in a single-parent family as fortune enough compared to those who experience outright neglect, which is projected to the real-life scenarios where individuals' mental health struggles are minimised or dismissed based on the external appearances of their lives. Hence, it further implies certain 'thresholds' for one to claim depression in Chinese society, fostering a harmful macro-narrative that depression is a condition only entitled to those whose lives are visibly 'miserable'. This framing dangerously oversimplifies depression, ignoring its complex causes and invalidating the experiences of many who do not meet these thresholds.

Furthermore, Excerpt 1 (3) shows a tendency to remain sluggish and self-isolated. The state of languishing, sluggishness, void and dullness is observed in Wendy's comment. Mobile phone addiction, exemplified by Wendy's comment that she only has her mobile phone, despite this clearly not being the case, has become a prevalent issue among young people in China. This phenomenon is positively related to negative emotions (Chen *et al.*, 2016), because social media usage does not make emotions easy and that the inability to be alone actually increases loneliness (Turkle, 2015). Also, it leads to the 'withdrawal mentality', a situational-avoidance device

to withdraw from social activities and associations offline (Magnavita, 1997; Oaten *et al.*, 2011). Being immersed in the virtual environment while disconnecting from the real world reflects the socio-economic phenomenon and psycho-social-structural dilemma between China's societal expectations of its youth and the allure of consumer culture (Bax, 2014). The scarcity of engaging in amateur life and offline activities drives individuals to seek solace in online environments to counter feelings of loneliness, emptiness, and meaninglessness; however, this growing digital dependence may just lead to more individual psychological distress and often exacerbate feelings of isolation.

5.2 *Identity as 'Zoufan' Members*

Although the community offers opportunities for the participants to freely express their depressive emotions and experiences, previous studies suggested that 'Zoufan' has insignificant positive impacts in responding to the members' needs for social support (Tang *et al.*, 2021). This study also found that the affiliation of 'Zoufan' was loose due to few direct interactions, a low possibility of continued contact, and a relationship with strangers. Among the sample data, only 18 per cent of the responses were directed towards others, while the remaining interactions consisted largely of self-talk. As self-talk takes precedence over dialogic exchange, an intriguing paradox emerges: Individuals who identify as depressed seem to seek attention within the discourse community while simultaneously resisting genuine engagement with others. They predominantly focus on self-expression, a state described as *affective incapacity* (Chen *et al.*, 2024). In this state, the depressed self-navigates a duality—their expressions appear to carry a willingness to affect and intervene in the emotional states of others, yet they resist being influenced or intervened upon in return.

Amid this sense of incapacity, there exists a unique and striking phenomenon: a profound personal intimacy with the late Ms. Ma/Zoufan shared by all the commenters. In this dynamic, Zoufan herself emerges as an invisible spiritual pillar, uniting the community in a way that transcends her physical absence. Notably, her suicide is frequently depicted as both courageous and admirable, transforming the site into an "affective space of suicidal longing" (Chen *et al.*, 2024), where the glorification of suicide and a longing for death become defining features and widespread practices within the community.

Excerpt 2:

(1) Commented by Irving:

刚才上楼差点摔倒了。突然感觉被扶了下,是你吗?爱你,上香了。
Just now (I) almost fell over when going upstairs. Suddenly (, I) felt (someone) helping me up. Is that you? (I) love you and have burnt joss sticks for you.

(2) Commented by Katie:

饭饭我下班了。不想在这里工作了,一点都不开心。
这个公司的管理好差劲,我又不知道去哪里?纠结年底要不要辞工?? ? ……
Fanfan, I am off work now. I do not want to work here anymore. (I am) not happy at all.
The management of this company is terrible, but I do not know where to go. (I am) hesitating about whether to resign at the end of the year or not??? ..

(3) Commented by Melia:

睡不着。刚才遇到喷子了。我哭了。我到晚上就是想自杀想死。还是饭这里比较温暖。
(I) can't sleep. Just now (,) I met an (Internet) troll. I cried. I just want to kill myself and die at night. It is warmer here in Fan's place.

(4) Commented by Lily:

我其实挺不想来走饭这里说话的,但在这里我觉得我不是一个人,所以我就允许自己继续在这里说话,这也算个去处。
In fact, I do not want to come to Zoufan to talk, but here I feel that I am not alone, so I allow myself to continue to talk here, which is also a place to go.

(5) Commented by Flo:

饭饭晚上好。我来看你啦。好几天没来了,还是忍不住了…
Good evening, Fanfan. I'm here to see you. I haven't been here for several days, but I still cannot help coming...

As mentioned, a few interactions were observed between the commenters. However, when confiding their innermost struggles, most commenters were inclined to address Ms. Ma/Zoufan rather than engage with other commenters. 'Fanfan' or 'Fan' is often used, as in Chinese culture, reiterative locution or the final syllable of a name often signifies intimacy, affection, or friendship. And this was not merely a personal choice or preference, but conveys three levels of connotations:

First, Zoufan is often perceived as a guardian angel or ghost (a spectral presence) in many comments. For example, in Excerpt 2 (1), with 'you'

referring to Zoufan, Irving believes that Zoufan is accompanying and protecting him. So, he burned incense to her, a religious ritual for statues of gods or idols, with the mental verb ‘love’ (爱) expressing a strong affection towards Zoufan. Such an affection differs significantly from that found in ‘fan circles’, where the admiration is directed toward living idols and is rooted in their human, rather than supernatural, existence.

The second connotation of the collective identity as ‘Zoufan’ members lies in the normative practice of sharing everyday life and emotions with Zoufan within the community, coupled with the imperceptible tendency to equate the site itself with Zoufan. For example, in Excerpt 2(2), Katie directed her questions about her job choice, an important life issue, toward Zoufan. Seeking advice, help, or support from peers in online communities (ODCs) is common (e.g., Zhang *et al.*, 2018), but asking questions to deceased people is both unusual and fantastical. This imagined help-seeking suggests that many commenters believe Zoufan can understand their struggles and offer emotional relief. Thus, sharing the mundane, everyday experiences with Zoufan appears to be an ‘affective practice’ (Wetherell, 2012) that authenticates the commenters’ identities as Zoufan members.

Also, both Excerpts 2(2) and 2(3) depict commenters’ unhappy, perplexed, and helpless selves through small, everyday stories or encounters. Yet, in doing so, they exclude key figures typically expected to offer tangible support, such as parents, friends, educators, or mental health professionals. At the same time, some commenters have come to equate the entire site with Zoufan herself, positioning it as Zoufan’s place (Fan’s place, 饭这里), as shown in Excerpt 2(3). This starkly contrasts with the fandom community, where the idol’s worship space encourages group participation among like-minded fans (Hills, 2017) rather than exclusively belonging to the idol. Simplifying the community into Zoufan’s place also reveals that commenters are involved in the community without engaging in authentic communal interactions, such as connecting with other members, exacerbating their tendency toward self-isolation within the community.

The third connotation of the collective identity is a psychological dependence on the community, which evolves into an (uncontrollable) habit of visiting the site. In Excerpt 2 (4), Lily shared that Zoufan was her go-to place for sharing, despite initially not wanting to frequent the site. This reluctance suggested that regular visits could imply a continuous struggle with negative emotions, given the community’s focus on sharing such

sentiments. The phrase ‘I allow myself to...’ reveals a nuanced internal conflict over her engagement with the site, balancing between the desire for support and the fear of becoming overly reliant on this digital sanctuary for emotional solace. Similarly, Flo’s comment in Excerpt 2 (5) articulated a struggle with the compulsive draw to the community, suggesting a conscious effort to avoid potential dependency. The attachment appears as a ritualistic engagement, where meaningful and genuine connections are eventually absent.

6. Discussion

Although the depression narratives analysed above were communicated via small stories, they reveal big stories about Chinese society. As observed, many young people in today’s China struggle with happiness due to the society’s overwhelming emphasis on pragmatic and material values, compounded by intense competition that shapes individual lives and limits personal capacities. Although studies show that the ongoing stigma of depression is still prevalent among the public in China (Yang *et al.*, 2020; Yu *et al.*, 2021), many Chinese people in the big cities may not feel this stigma anymore (Higgins *et al.*, 2008), especially young people. Disclosing a mental health issue is not necessarily difficult; however, the real challenge lies in the lack of understanding and support that often follows. Additionally, they may face doubts about whether they are ‘eligible’ to experience depression, and their struggles with meeting social expectations and forming meaningful connections are rarely acknowledged. Hence, they are becoming increasingly disconnected from their surroundings in the offline world, which also partially explains the widespread self-closure in real life (like a kind of self-protection) and self-disclosure in cyberspace (like a kind of self-help), which reveals the broader societal failure to provide adequate support for those grappling with depression.

On the other hand, although the massive participation in unmanaged ODCs like ‘Zoufan’ reveals an emotional need for such sites, the positive influences of these digital spaces on individual mental well-being landscapes are limited, because mutual interactions and genuine connections were rarely observed. Most comments are quite fragmented self-talk, making the sharing more like casual emotional dumping than a beneficial exchange. In particular, the peculiar personal intimacy with the late Ms. Ma suggests a cognitive process of delusion, isolating users from other commenters as their

focus remains solely on Zoufan, thereby fostering disconnection within the community.

The above indicates a painful state of disconnection that these individuals experience both offline and online, which is linked to a sense of alienation. Alienation, manifested as powerlessness, normlessness and social isolation, is described as a feeling of disconnection from meaningful relationships and a state of estrangement from others, society, or oneself, which is considered a key indicator of mental well-being, including depression (Chen *et al.*, 2022; Dean, 1961). This sense of alienation further reveals a fundamental disconnection in today's Chinese society, that material wealth does not connect with a safeguard for mental well-being. It sharply diverges from many of China's ambitious political, economic, and social policies that only emphasise the importance of prosperity, strength, and national greatness. It also challenges the prevalent assumption that economic growth and material success are synonymous with the overall health and happiness of the population. Although many governmental policies have included people's happiness as a central agenda, such as the claim that "people's happiness is the biggest human right" in China's official announcement for The Summit of the Future and the 79th Session of the United Nations General Assembly (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2024), this approach remains too broad and fails to sufficiently address the critical issue of mental health. Moreover, mental well-being is often overshadowed by the lack of other fundamental components necessary for societal success and individual fulfilment, such as employment and education. For instance, China's ongoing unemployment crisis has persisted for several years, with the unemployment rate for youth aged 16 to 24 exceeding 17 per cent in 2024 (Yang, 2024). This persistent issue highlights the need for a more targeted approach to addressing the complex relationship between societal stability, economic opportunities, and mental health.

7. Conclusion

This study illuminates a nuanced dynamic in the construction of individual and collective identities in online depression narratives, particularly within the context of a group identified as 'Zoufan': When the core participants construct and communicate their identity as 'depressed individuals', their narratives frequently underscore a significant lack of emotional support in their offline environments. This deficiency is multifaceted, encompassing not

just an absence of understanding and empathy from their immediate social circles, such as family and friends, but also a perceived ‘ineligibility’ to openly discuss their struggles with depression in real-world contexts, which in turn can lead to the disconnection offline. When the core participants construct their collective identity as ‘Zoufan’ members, the unusual sense of personal intimacy with the late Ms. Ma indicates a cognitive process of delusion, isolating users from other commenters by directing their attention exclusively toward Zoufan. This, in turn, promotes a sense of disconnection within the community. Also, the psychological dependence on the community reinforces the participants’ withdrawal from real-life social activities and connections.

The duality of these identities underscores a sense of disconnection and alienation, both online and offline, suggesting a lack of sufficient real-life support systems for individuals with depression and further exposing the growing divide between economic prosperity and mental well-being in Chinese society. A concerted effort is necessary to cultivate greater empathy, understanding, and awareness regarding mental health in society. Also, to foster a happier generation and a happier China, mental well-being ought to be addressed and emphasised in major national and social strategic plans. Additionally, promoting and facilitating access to mental health services and resources can help bridge the gap between those suffering in silence and the support they critically need. Ultimately, these efforts can contribute to a more compassionate and informed society where individuals feel empowered to seek help and support for depression.

Notes

- ¹ Two criteria of purposive sampling are applied: (1) participants had to post comments in at least three different months (whether consecutive or intermittent), which amounts to over three quarters of the total collection period; (2) participants were required to post at least one comment per day on average during the data collection period (114 comments at least at total).

Funding

This research was supported by the National Social Science Fund of China (NSSF) -Project Title: *A Study on the Emotional Narratives and Identity Discourse of Unemployed Youth in Online Depression Communities* [Grant Number: 25CYY065].

Reference List

- Anagnost, A. (2008), "From 'Class' to 'Social Strata': Grasping the Social Totality in Reform-Era China", *Third World Quarterly*, Vol. 29, No. 3, pp. 497-519. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01436590801931488>.
- Bamberg, M. (2012), "Narrative Practice and Identity Navigation", in J. A. Holstein, J. F. Gubrium (eds), *Varieties of Narrative Analysis*, London: SAGE Publications, pp. 99-124.
- Bamberg, M., De Fina, A. and Schiffrin, D. (2011), "Discourse and Identity Construction", in S. J. Schwartz, K. Luyckx and V. L. Vignoles (eds), *Handbook of Identity Theory and Research*, New York: Springer, pp. 177-199.
- Bamberg, M., Georgakopoulou, A. (2008), "Small Stories as a New Perspective in Narrative and Identity Analysis", *Text & Talk*, Vol. 28, No. 3, pp. 377-396. <https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.1515/TEXT.2008.018>.
- Bax, T. (2014), "Internet Addiction in China: The Battle for the Hearts and Minds of Youth", *Deviant Behavior*, Vol. 35, No. 9, pp. 687-702. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01639625.2013.878576>.
- Bourdieu, P. (1977), *Outline of A Theory of Practice* (R. Nice, Trans.), Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Chen, L., Yan, Z., Tang, W., Yang, F., Xie, X. and He, J. (2016), "Mobile Phone Addiction Levels and Negative Emotions among Chinese Young Adults: The Mediating Role of Interpersonal Problems", *Computers in Human Behavior*, Vol. 55, pp. 856-866. <https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chb.2015.10.030>.
- Chen, W.-C., Chen, S.-J. and Zhong, B.-L. (2022), "Sense of Alienation and Its Associations with Depressive Symptoms and Poor Sleep Quality in Older Adults Who Experienced the Lockdown in Wuhan, China, during the COVID-19 Pandemic", *Journal of Geriatric Psychiatry and Neurology*, Vol. 35, No. 2, pp. 215-222. <https://doi.org/10.1177/08919887221078564>.

- Chen, Y. (2024), “‘Zoufan’ as a ‘Tree Hole’ for Online Sharing of Depression: Participation Patterns, Dominant Topics and Linguistic Features”, *International Journal of Humanities, Philosophy and Language*, Vol. 7, No. 26, pp. 41-58. <https://gaexcellence.com/ijhpl/article/view/506>.
- Chen, Y., Ang, P. S. and Lee, C. (2024), “Affective Incapacity of the Depressed Self: Evidence from a Narrative Study of an Online Depression Community on Weibo”, *Emotion, Space and Society*, Vol. 53, No. 101041, pp. 1-9. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.emospa.2024.101041>.
- Cohen, G. L. (2022), *Belonging: The Science of Creating Connection and Bridging Divides*, New York: W. W. Norton & Company.
- Crabtree, J. W., Haslam, S. A., Postmes, T. and Haslam, C. (2010), “Mental Health Support Groups, Stigma, and Self-Esteem: Positive and Negative Implications of Group Identification”, *Journal of Social Issues*, Vol. 66, No. 3, pp. 553-569. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1540-4560.2010.01662.x>.
- Cruwys, T., Haslam, S. A., Dingle, G. A., Haslam, C. and Jetten, J. (2014), “Depression and Social Identity: An Integrative Review”, *Personality and Social Psychology Review*, Vol. 18, No. 3, pp. 215-238. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1088868314523839>.
- Sina Weibo Data Center (2019), “2018 Weibo Yonghu Fazhan Baogao [Weibo User Development Report 2018]”. <https://data.weibo.com/report/reportDetail?id=433>.
- Dean, D. G. (1961), “Alienation: Its Meaning and Measurement”, *American Sociological Review*, Vol. 26, No. 5, pp. 753-758. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2090204>.
- Franzke, A. S., Bechmann, A., Zimmer, M., Ess, C. and the Association of Internet Researchers (2020), “Internet Research: Ethical Guidelines 3.0”. <https://aoir.org/reports/ethics3.pdf>.
- Gao, L., Xie, Y., Jia, C. and Wang, W. (2020), “Prevalence of Depression among Chinese University Students: A Systematic Review and Meta-Analysis”, *Scientific Reports*, Vol. 10, No. 15897, pp. 1-11. <https://doi.org/10.1038/s41598-020-72998-1>.
- Gao, Y.-H. and Ling, M. (2019), “Analysis of Suicidal Tendencies in Microblog Discourse: The Case of ‘Zou Fan’”, *Foreign Languages and Their Teaching*, No. 1, pp. 43-55.
- Graham, C., Zhou, S. and Zhang, J. (2017), “Happiness and Health in China: The Paradox of Progress”, *World Development*, Vol. 96, pp. 231-244.

- <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.worlddev.2017.03.009>.
- Grant, A. (2021, April 19), “There’s a Name for the Blah You’re Feeling: It’s Called Languishing”, *The New York Times*. <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/04/19/well/mind/covid-mental-health-languishing.html>.
- Gu, X. and Mao, E. Z. (2022), “The Impacts of Academic Stress on College Students’ Problematic Smartphone Use and Internet Gaming Disorder under the Background of Neijuan: Hierarchical Regressions with Mediation Analysis on Escape and Coping Motives”, *Frontiers in Psychiatry*, Vol. 13, pp. 1-13. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsy.2022.1032700>.
- Handley, T. E., Inder, K. J., Kelly, B. J., Attia, J. R., Lewin, T. J., Fitzgerald, M. N. and Kay-Lambkin, F. J. (2012), “You’ve Got to Have Friends: The Predictive Value of Social Integration and Support in Suicidal Ideation among Rural Communities”, *Social Psychiatry & Psychiatric Epidemiology*, Vol. 47, No. 8, pp. 1281-1290. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s00127-011-0436-y>.
- Haslam, S. A., Jetten, J., Postmes, T. and Haslam, C. (2009), “Social Identity, Health and Well-Being: An Emerging Agenda for Applied Psychology”, *Applied Psychology: An International Review*, Vol. 58, No. 1, pp. 1-23. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1464-0597.2008.00379.x>.
- Haslam, S. A. and Reicher, S. (2006), “Stressing the Group: Social Identity and the Unfolding Dynamics of Responses to Stress”, *Journal of Applied Psychology*, Vol. 91, No. 5, pp. 1037-1052. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0021-9010.91.5.1037>.
- Hesketh, T., Ding, Q. J. and Jenkins, R. (2002), “Suicide Ideation in Chinese Adolescents”, *Social Psychiatry and Psychiatric Epidemiology*, Vol. 37, No. 5, pp. 230-235. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s00127-002-0536-9>.
- Higgins, L., Davey, G., Gao, X., Zheng, R., Ni, Z. and Lang, L. (2008), “Counselling in China: Past, Present and Future”, *Psychology & Developing Societies*, Vol. 20, pp. 99-109. <https://doi.org/10.1177/097133360702000105>.
- Hills, M. (2017), “From Fan Culture/Community to the Fan World: Possible Pathways and Ways of Having Done Dandom”, *Palabra Clave - Revista de Comunicación*, Vol. 20, pp. 856-883. <https://doi.org/10.5294/pacla.2017.20.4.2>.
- Ip, V., Chan, F., Chan, J. Y., Lee, J. K. Y., Sung, C. and Wilson, H. E. (2016), “Factors Influencing Chinese College Students’ Preferences for Mental

- Health Professionals”, *Journal of Mental Health*, Vol. 25, No. 2, pp. 142-147. <https://doi.org/10.3109/09638237.2015.1057328>.
- Kozinets, R., Dolbec, P. and Earley, A. (2014), “M Netnographic Analysis: Understanding Culture through Social Media Data”, in U. Flick (ed), *SAGE Handbook of Qualitative Data Analysis*, London: SAGE Publications, pp. 262-275.
- Li, Y., Li, Y. and Cao, J. (2012), “Factors Associated with Suicidal Behaviors in Mainland China: A Meta-Analysis”, *BMC Public Health*, Vol. 12, No. 524, pp. 1-13. <https://doi.org/10.1186/1471-2458-12-524>.
- Liu, W., Yu, F., Geldsetzer, P., Yang, J., Wang, Z., Golden, T., Jiao, L., Chen, Q., Liu, H., Wu, P., Wang, C., Bärnighausen, T. and Chen, S. (2022), “Prevalence of Depression in China during the Early Stage of the COVID-19 Pandemic: A Cross-Sectional Study in an Online Survey Sample”, *BMJ Open*, Vol. 12, No. e056667, pp. 1-10. <https://doi.org/10.1136/bmjopen-2021-056667>.
- Magnavita, J. J. (1997), *Restructuring Personality Disorders: A Short-Term Dynamic Approach*, New York and London: Guilford Publications.
- McCarthy, S. J. and Moje, E. B. (2002), “Identity Matters”, *Reading Research Quarterly*, Vol. 37, No. 2, pp. 228-238. <https://doi.org/10.1598/RRQ.37.2.6>.
- McKinlay, A. and McVittie, C. (2011), *Identities in Context: Individuals and Discourse in Action*, Oxford and Malden: Wiley-Blackwell.
- Ministry of Foreign Affairs China (2024, September 19), “Position Paper of the People’s Republic of China for the Summit of the Future and the 79th Session of the United Nations General Assembly”, *The People’s Republic of China*. https://www.mfa.gov.cn/eng/zy/wjzc/202409/t20240920_11493896.html#:~:text=Human%20rights%20for%20all%20is,is%20the%20biggest%20human%20right.
- Mishler, E. G. (2004), *Storylines: Craftartists’ Narratives of Identity*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- Molero, F., Fuster, M., Jetten, J. and Moriano, J. (2011), “Living with HIV/AIDS: A Psychosocial Perspective on Coping with Prejudice and Discrimination”, *Journal of Applied Social Psychology*, Vol. 41, pp. 609-626. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1559-1816.2011.00729.x>.
- Norton, B. (1997), “Language, Identity, and the Ownership of English”, *TESOL Quarterly*, Vol. 31, No. 3, pp. 409-429. <https://doi.org/10.2307/3587831>.

- Oaten, M., Stevenson, R. J. and Case, T. I. (2011), "Disease Avoidance as a Functional Basis for Stigmatization", *Philosophical Transactions B*, Vol. 366, No. 1583, pp. 3433-3452. <https://doi.org/10.1098/rstb.2011.0095>.
- Oldenburg, R. (1999), *The Great Good Place: Cafes, Coffee Shops, Bookstores, Bars, Hair Salons, and Other Hangouts at the Heart of the Community* (3 ed.), New York: Marlowe & Company.
- Python Software Foundation (2020), *Python* (Version 3.9.1). <https://www.python.org/>.
- Sarup, M. (1996), *Identity, Culture and the Postmodern World*, Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.
- Scollon, R. (2001), *Mediated Discourse: The Nexus of Practice* (1st ed.), London and New York: Routledge.
- Settanni, M. and Marengo, D. (2015), "Sharing Feelings Online: Studying Emotional Well-Being via Automated Text Analysis of Facebook Posts", *Frontiers in Psychology*, Vol. 6, No. 1045, pp.1-7. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2015.01045>.
- Smith, K. (2014), "Mental Health: A World of Depression", *Nature*, Vol. 515, No. 7526, pp. 180-181. <https://doi.org/10.1038/515180a>.
- Song, Y., Jia, C. and Zhou, Y. (2020), "Daxuesheng Yiyu Xianzhuang Ji Yingxiang Yinsu Yanjiu Jinzhan [Research Progress on Depression among College Students and Its Influencing Factors]", *PSY*, Vol. 15, No. 18, pp. 237-240. <https://doi.org/10.19738/j.cnki.psy.2020.18.107>.
- Tajfel, H. (1970), "Experiments in Intergroup Discrimination", *Scientific American*, Vol. 223, No. 5, pp. 96-103.
- Tan, Y., Lattie, E. G., Qiu, Y., Teng, Z., Wu, C., Tang, H. and Chen, J. (2021), "Accessibility of Mental Health Support in China and Preferences on Web-based Services for Mood Disorders: A Qualitative Study", *Internet Interventions*, Vol. 26, No. 100475, pp. 1-10. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.invent.2021.100475>.
- Tan, Y., Teng, Z., Qiu, Y., Tang, H., Xiang, H. and Chen, J. (2020), "Potential of Mobile Technology to Relieve the Urgent Mental Health Needs in China: Web-based Survey", *JMIR mHealth and uHealth*, Vol. 8, No. 7, pp. 1-18. <https://doi.org/10.2196/16215>.
- Tang, J., Yao, X. and Yu, G. (2021), "Exploring the Online Behavior of Users of Online Depression-focused Communities: Comparing Communities with Different Management Types", *Psychology Research and Behavior Management*, Vol. 14, pp. 1707-1724. <https://doi.org/10.2196/16215>.

- org/10.2147/prbm.S323027.
- Tang, J., Yu, G. and Yao, X. (2021), "Emotional Contagion in the Online Depression Community", *Healthcare*, Vol. 9, No. 12, pp. 1-14. <https://doi.org/10.3390/healthcare9121609>.
- Taylor, S. (2015), "Identity Construction", in K. Tracy (ed), *International Encyclopedia of Language and Social Interaction*, Chichester and Malden: John Wiley & Sons, pp. 1-9.
- Townsend, L. and Wallace, C. (2016), "Social Media Research: A Guide to Ethics". Retrieved February 26, 2021 from <http://www.dotrural.ac.uk/socialmediaresearchethics.pdf>.
- Turkle, S. (2015), *Reclaiming Conversation: The Power of Talk in a Digital Age*, New York: Penguin Press.
- Turner, J. C., Oakes, P., Haslam, S. and McGarty, C. (1994), "Self and Collective: Cognition and Social Context", *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, Vol. 20, No. 5, pp. 454-463. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0146167294205002>.
- Turner, J. C. and Oakes, P. J. (1997), "The Socially Structured Mind", in C. McGarty, S. A. Haslam (eds), *The Message of Social Psychology: Perspectives on Mind in Society*, Malden: Blackwell Publishing, pp. 355-373.
- Van Leeuwen, T. (2021), *Multimodality and Identity* (1st ed), London and New York: Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003186625>.
- Wetherell, M. (2012), *Affect and Emotion: A New Social Science Understanding*, London: SAGE Publications.
- World Health Organization. (2025, August 28), "Depressive Disorder (Depression)". <https://www.who.int/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/depression>.
- Xiang, B. and Qi, W. (2023), *Self as Method: Thinking through China and the World* (D. Ownby, Trans.), Singapore: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Yang, F., Yang, B. X., Stone, T. E., Wang, X. Q., Zhou, Y., Zhang, J. and Jiao, S. F. (2020), "Stigma towards Depression in a Community-based Sample in China", *Comprehensive Psychiatry*, Vol. 97, pp. 1-7. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.comppsy.2019.152152>.
- Yang, W. (2024, December 9), "Unemployment Continues to Plague China's Youth in 2024", *Voice of America*. <https://www.voanews.com/a/unemployment-continues-to-plague-china-s-youth-in-2024-/7892948.html>.

- Yu, L., Jiang, W., Ren, Z., Xu, S., Zhang, L. and Hu, X. (2021), “Detecting Changes in Attitudes toward Depression on Chinese Social Media: A Text Analysis”, *Journal of Affective Disorders*, Vol. 280, pp. 354-363. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jad.2020.11.040>.
- Zhang, A.-L., Wang, Z.-M. and Huang, X.-T. (2017), “Current Situation of Fee of Counseling and Psychotherapy in China”, *Chinese Mental Health Journal*, Vol. 3, No. 1, pp. 40-45.
- Zhang, R., Eschler, J. and Reddy, M. (2018), “Online Support Groups for Depression in China: Culturally Shaped Interactions and Motivations”, *Computer Supported Cooperative Work*, Vol. 27, No. 3, pp. 327-354. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10606-018-9322-4>.
- Zhao, Y. (2018), “Chinese Youth’s Suicides and Its Changing Trend: 2003-2015”, *South China Population*, No. 4, pp. 12-23.
- Zhou, K., Chen, J., Huang, C. and Tang, S. (2023), “Prevalence of and Factors Influencing Depression and Anxiety among Chinese Adolescents: A Protocol for a Systematic Review”, *BMJ Open*, Vol. 13, No. e068119, pp. 1-4. <https://doi.org/10.1136/bmjopen-2022-068119>.